

YULE or WINTER SOLSTICE

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An earlier version of this article appeared in Lady Letter, volume 1. no. 3.

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Yule celebrates the winter solstice, the year's shortest day when the sun ceases its southern journey and begins its return north. Yule is a Nordic word meaning wheel. The Celtic name for this solstice is Alban Arthuran. The winter solstice was celebrated throughout the ancient pagan world and included Greek and Roman festivals. The sun provided light and warmed the earth; its gradual disappearance each fall caused great concern. Each year our ancestors worried that maybe this year the sun would not return. Consequently their solstice celebrations used lots of lights in an attempt to lure back the Sun.

Yule also celebrates the death and rebirth of the sun god(s). Ancient Celts believed that the Goddess lived forever, but the sun god was annually born at Yule. He matured during the winter and spring, became her lover and mated with her during the fullness of the growing season, then grew old and frail as the crops matured and were harvested. At Yule the Goddess gave birth to his son, the new sun king, after the old king died, and so the annual cycle began again.

Later, the Druids believed that the Oak King ruled during the waxing year. At Yule he battled and overcame the Holly King who ruled during the waning year. At Litha, the summer solstice, the two kings battled again with the returned Holly King emerging as victor until the next Yule.

An older Irish explanation for the change of seasons beginning at the solstices involved the robin and wren. At Yule, the robin, a symbol of the waxing year, killed the wren, a symbol of the waning year. According to Edain McCoy in her book *Witta: An Irish Tradition*, at one time each Irish family killed at least one wren at Yule.

Whatever tradition is honored and remembered at Yule, it is clear that a major change of season begins with the return of the sun, although obviously longer days and the return of moderate temperatures are not noticed until Imbolc or Candlemas.

Modern Yule Rituals

Modern Pagans can celebrate a hearty traditional Yule without compromise because it is their ancient pagan holiday. Anyone who celebrated Christmas as a child knows the basic pagan Yule customs. These are preserved as the secular Christmas traditions and include the burning of lights and the bringing of evergreen decorations into our homes. Green fir, pine, or holly represent living plant life preserved during the dark season that began at Samhain. Their presence in our homes visually expresses a hope and longing for the regreening of nature in spring. You celebrate a traditional pagan Yule when you place candles in the windows, decorate a "Christmas" tree with lights, use decorations of holly and mistletoe, sing "secular" seasonal songs, feast with friends, and give gifts to loved ones. All these customs originated with Yule celebrations that predated Christianity.

A more specific pagan custom is to burn white, red, and black candles which symbolize the maiden, mother, and crone aspects of the Triple Goddess. White and red are still major Christmas colors. Sing "Deck the Halls" or other "old English" carols that describe joyous celebrations and express good feelings toward all of mankind.

Coven rituals can include a reenactment of the death of the old Sun King and his rebirth, or the victory of the Oak King over the Holly King. Light a new yule log, an old French phallic symbol, using the remnants of last year's Yule log as kindling. Exchange small anonymous

gifts among coven members, and of course, follow the ritual with a sumptuous feast.

Yule and Christmas

The Saturnalia honored the Roman god Saturn and was the new year's festival held at the winter solstice in pre-Christian Rome. Gifts were exchanged in honor of those who had died during the previous year. Determining which day the actual solstice occurred was difficult because the day length varied by less than one minute between December 16 and December 26 and mechanical clocks were yet to be invented. The Roman emperor Aurelian decided by decree in 273 C. E. that December 25 would be the day of the Saturnalia. This was also the birthday of Mithra, a Persian savior god, whose anti-female cult greatly influenced early Christianity. Later, in the 4th century C.E., the Christian leaders decided to celebrate the birth of Christ on this date. This did not mean that they believed that Jesus was born on December 25. Rather, they chose to celebrate Christ's birth at this time to redirect the people away from pagan celebrations. Later generations of Christians were unaware that the officially chosen date for the celebration of Christ's birth was not the actual date. Despite the historical inaccuracy, Christ fit the profile that other sun/son gods had who were honored at this time of year.

The Sun's Cycle Through the Year

The ancient explanation for the disappearance of the sun each fall, followed by its reappearance after the Solstice, was as follows.

It seems that an immortal goddess gave birth to a new sun god at the last Solstice. As the infant sun god slowly grew in size and strength, the sun returned north and the days slowly became longer and warmer.

By the time spring arrived and the plants bloomed and the leaves appeared, the young sun god had grown into a strong young man who was ready for a mate. His mother, the goddess, noticed that he was no longer a child but rather a handsome man who now attracted her attention. The goddess and sun god then mutually selected each other as partners. The year continued to progress into the long warm summer days. The goddess and sun god consummated their marriage and she became pregnant again.

The summer season gradually turned into fall with its shorter days. This occurred because the sun god had exhausted his energy in heating and lighting the earth so that the crops would grow. After the harvest there was nothing left for the sun god to do but grow old and die. Slowly he retreated south, providing less warmth and daylight. The immortal goddess, however, fondly remembered her time with him when he was in his full summer vigor. At Yule the goddess rebirths the sun god and the cycle continues.